

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Explosion from Slash Pile

Date: May 7, 2026

Location: Tracie Road

Franklin County, Washington

This Fire Story Focuses on Hidden Hazards in Burning Slash Pile

“The blast wave pushed me backward onto my right side, causing me to fall to the ground.”

Engine Officer

Background

On May 7, 2026, Franklin County Fire Protection District #3 responded to a slash pile on fire in the backyard of a residence caused by an out-of-control burn. During size-up, the engine company reported *“an explosion from the slash pile with minor injuries.”*

This incident occurred when a wildland engine arrived at a burning slash pile in the backyard. The engine positioned to the west of the burning slash pile. Nine minutes after arrival of the engine, an explosion occurred within the burning pile, sending a blast of heat that knocked both crew members to the ground and caused minor burns to one crew member.



Photo from Ring Camera

Timeline – May 7, 2026

18:14 – First alarm Natural Cover Fire Response as dispatched by Southeast Communications.

18:25 – First engine arrives to a large 50x50 pile on fire and establishes IC and makes a request for two additional water tenders.

18:29 – Fire Chief arrives and parks in front of the house away from the burning pile.

18:33 – Engine officer transfers command to Fire Chief and establishes communications on a tactical channel.

18:34 – Engine operator reports an explosion on primary channel and requests a medic unit for two injuries and an additional engine.

18:36 – IC conducts a Personnel Accountability Report (PAR) from the crew on the Tactical Channel. The engine officer answers on a portable. The engine operator did not have a portable radio and used the mobile radio on the primary channel—creating some confusion.

18:51 – Medic and additional engines arrive to evaluate two firefighters. One civilian was burned on their arms and refused transport by ambulance.

19:00 – Additional engines and water tenders arrive and operated from a safe distance and allow slash pile to burn and ensure there are no more explosions.

19:06 – Incident Safety Officer arrives and is assigned safety and to begin investigation.

19:31 – Both crew members arrive at the local hospital via medic. Peer support member is sent to hospital to act as Liaison.

21:54 – Incident scene is stabilized.

The Story



On May 7, 2026, at approximately 18:14 hours, an engine company responded to a reported brush fire at a residential property after dispatch received reports that cardboard boxes being burned had spread to nearby vegetation. While enroute, crews observed a large smoke column visible from the area and continued emergent to the scene.



Upon arrival, firefighters encountered three separate large burning piles involving heavy fuels, including stacked firewood, large cottonwood trees and unidentified materials. Initial fire suppression efforts were made using a booster line. However, crews quickly determined that the available hose line was ineffective due to the fire volume, fuel load, and extreme heat conditions. The operation transitioned to a defensive posture and the engine apparatus was repositioned away from direct heat exposure to protect equipment and personnel.



During size-up operations and while personnel were repositioning equipment and assessing the involved piles, a large explosion occurred from one of the burning debris piles. The explosion produced a significant blast wave, intense heat, and loud noise, pushing personnel backward and temporarily disorienting them. One firefighter was knocked to the ground while another firefighter and nearby civilians moved away from the area to create distance from the fire.

Following the initial blast, additional smaller explosions occurred.



After regrouping, firefighters conducted accountability and injury assessments. Minor burn injuries were observed to exposed skin areas, including the face, neck, and arms. Civilians on scene were also evaluated after sustaining minor burns. Additional fire apparatus and a medic unit were requested. Command was transferred to a chief officer upon arrival. Firefighters and civilians temporarily sheltered behind a trailer while secondary explosions continued.



Crews later regrouped at the front of the property and provided command with updated fire conditions, including reports of additional spot fires and smoke columns developing in nearby fields following the explosion. Apparatus were repositioned to support ongoing operations and responding medic units evaluated affected personnel on scene. Two firefighters were transported to the local medical center for further evaluation and were later released and sent home for the remainder of the shift.

Footage from a porch camera showing before, during, and after the explosion.

The explosion was later determined to be a **Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion** or **BLEVE**. The contents in the sealed 55-gallon drum was an unknown quantity of old diesel fuel contaminated with gasoline.



This aerial footage shows the location of the incident on Tracie Road.

1. Initial Arriving Engine.
2. Firefighter, Driver
3. Engine Officer
4. Civilian
5. Initial Fire Location
6. Fire spread
7. Explosion
8. Blast Direction
9. Spot Fires

Engine Officer Perspective: Taking a Tactical Pause

“The ‘Tactical Pause’ is a common term in both military and wildland firefighting parlance. When you are unsure of what lies ahead, stop for a moment—look, listen and think.”

Both the Engine Operator and Officer were wearing all their PPE. The Engine Officer was not wearing gloves as they were not engaged in fire suppression.

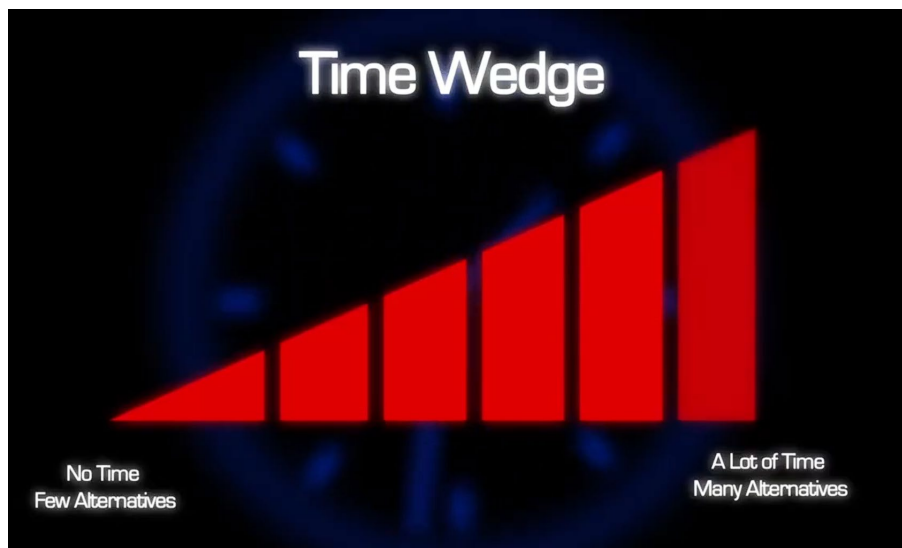
The primary lesson from the Engine Officer on this incident is SLOW DOWN.

- Check for life safety. If there is no immediate life safety concern slow down and let fire consume for a couple of minutes.
- Once life safety is covered, you can focus on property preservation. On this call there was only creeping ground fire that wasn't threatening anything in the larger picture.
- Take your time, let the fire consume while you await resources and take a moment to look at what you really have going on.
- This applies to any wildland fire or urban interface fire.

Look – Can we see unidentifiable hazardous material containers or other hazards inside the slash pile?

Listen – Talk to occupants or witnesses and ask questions.

Think - A tactical pause allows you to consider where you are on the “Time Wedge”. If have the time, carefully consider a variety of alternatives.



Time Wedge graphic from WFSTAR Video "[Developing Realistic Tactical Objectives.](#)"



The fire prior to the explosion.

“Upon arrival, I pulled the booster line from the driver’s side and attempted fire extinguishment. I quickly realized the booster line was having little to no effect on reducing the heat or slowing the fire spread.”

“While walking towards the burning pile that was furthest southeast of the property, one of the civilians started walking towards me so he stopped to talk. At that moment there was a large explosion coming from the large pile.”



The black dot in the photo in the red circle is the lid from the 55-gallon drum caught on the ring camera.

One firefighter received minor burns to neck and face. The civilian received burns to the underside of their arms protecting their face.

Perspective

Two Key Lessons the Engine Operator and Engine Officer Want to Share

1. If there is no immediate life safety concern SLOW DOWN!
2. Make sure you always wear appropriate PPE, no matter how “routine” the incident appears.

Conclusion

This incident within the incident is a significant event that should cause pause, reflection, and learning throughout the wildland fire community and supporting organizations. Conditions can change rapidly when operating on any fire scene. If you were not the one that piled the slash, do not take for granted the unforeseen hazards.

Safety on the fire line also involves thinking about hazardous materials. If you ever go through extensive HazMat Awareness training, you will learn that one foundational principle is to: “Treat every incident as a HazMat incident until proven otherwise.” Wildland incidents AND urban interface situations fit into this category.

Review *NWCG S130 Module 10: Hazardous Material Topic*.

Potential Hazard

- Hidden hazards in large slash piles.

Possible Solutions

Detect the Presence of HazMat using D.E.C.I.D.E. methodology

- Detect
- Estimate harm
- Choose response objectives
- Identify action options
- Do the best option

Evaluate each fire in your agency like this one to understand why actions and decisions made sense at the time, we must evaluate the context in which they were made. To truly learn from this incident, we need to take a tactical pause and look, listen and think.

Peer support and a debriefing after an incident like this is a must.

Besides what we offer our first responders in psychological first aid, crisis support, debriefings and referrals to additional resources. It is worthwhile to further explore how to treat the mental health of our firefighters as a “Value at Risk” in our decision making and thought process.

This RLS was submitted by:

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